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ABSTRACT

The first section of this paper focuses on misunderstandings surrounding two of the proposals for changing sexist aspects of the English language, namely, avoiding the use of masculine pronouns (he, his, him, himself) with alleged sex-indefinite reference, and replacing the word and morpheme "man" with "person" in sex-indefinite usage. Several arguments against adopting these and other changes aimed at reducing sexism in language are discussed and examples of them are provided. It is noted that the content and tone of the arguments against change have remained essentially the same from 1972 to 1978. In a second section of the paper, a number of misapplications of the proposals for changing sexist language are discussed in detail: (1) overextensions that violate morpheme structure; (2) violations of parallelism in reference to the sexes; and (3) partial changes that retain sex-stereotyping and the coining of words to ridicule other coinages. Data are presented on the misuse of "Ms." and on male-first word order (e.g., he and she; men and women). It is concluded that despite the misunderstandings and misapplications there is a strong awareness of changes toward nonsexist language in American society as represented in newspapers, magazines, and scholarly newsletters. (Author/AMH)

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SOCIOLINGUISTIC CHANGE TOWARDS NONSEXIST LANGUAGE: AN OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MISAPPLICATIONS

by

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The existence of sexism in the English language was presented as a problem by feminists writing in the early 1970's. Several notable early discussions of the topic were reprinted by KNOW, Inc., a publisher affiliated with the National Organization for Women (Densmore, 1970; Faust, 1970; and One, 1971), while others appeared in feminist magazines, e.g., Ms., (Miller & Swift, 1972; Graham, 1973) and Women: A Journal of Liberation (Toth, 1970; Murray, 1973), and as chapters in feminist books (Greer, 1971; Strainchamps, 1971). In addition to establishing the existence of sexism in language, some early writers presented proposals for eliminating sexist language structure and usage. By the mid-1970's, numerous guidelines for avoiding sexist language in academic publications had been proposed by publishing companies (e.g., Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1975; Macmillan Publishing Company, 1975; McGraw Hill Book Company, 1974; Scott, Foresman & Company, 1972) and by professional organizations (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1975; National Council of Teachers of English, n.d.). In Blaubergs (1978), I categorized the various proposals for changing sexist language according to their underlying rationale. In this paper, I discuss the theoretical arguments that have been presented against changing sexist language and some of the misapplications of the proposals for change in usage. I focus primarily on the proposals for eliminating the generic usage of words that are typically used in reference to males only, i.e., avoiding the use of the pronouns, he, his, him, and himself, and replacing the morpheme "man" with "person" or a circumlocution whenever the referent is not a specific male. A theoretical discussion of the rationale for these proposals and the specific strategies for their implementation may be found in Blaubergs (1978), while experimental studies of the interpretation of the alleged generic terms have been reported by Shepelak (1977), Silveira (1978) and Martyna (in press). Additionally,

historical analyses of the usage and meaning of the alleged generic terms have been presented by Bodine (1975), Butler (1977), and Stanley (1975a).

Arguments Against Changing Sexist Language

Various arguments against changing sexist language have appeared in newspapers, magazines, professional newsletters and journals, introductions to textbooks, and in other academic and nonacademic writing. In general, the arguments that have been presented are both interrelated and contradictory: some deny the existence of sexist language, while others acknowledge its existence but deny its importance, while still others treat the proposals for change as violations of certain conceptualizations of language. In this section, I illustrate six commonly presented arguments against changing sexist language and their variants.

(1) Proponents of changing sexist language have variously argued that sexism in a language reflects, influences, reinforces, maintains, or otherwise facilitates the continued existence of sex-role stereotyping and sexism in societal institutions and practices. Opponents of change have misconstrued such claims as follows: sexism in a language determines sexist practices in the society that uses that language. Thus, their argument against changing sexist language becomes that it is not necessary to do so since language does not cause sexism. A frequently presented version of the argument focuses on cross-cultural comparisons, and consequently I have previously labelled this argument as the "cross-cultural argument" (Blaubergs, 1978, p. 246). The following quotations exemplify this argument:

> I'd really like to see some cross-cultural studies of the effects of language on sex roles before we start dismantling the English language. (Whitely, 1972, p. 14)

> If language was an ideology, and sexist language in particular was the ideology of male power, one should expect to find a fairly stable correlation between degrees of feminine subservience in society and degrees of sexism in language. (Tavard, 1977, p. 129)

The cross-cultural argument has also been applied to dialect variations within the English language. Notably, Foster (1972), in a letter to the editor of the newsletter of the American Anthropological Association, described the Ozark Mountain Dialect as one in which they-singular rather than he is used in reference to sex-indeterminate antecedents, and then asserted that:

> From the point of view of the antisexism-in-language movements, the interesting thing about this dialect is who speaks it. I have no statistical information on this question, but I confess to a compelling impression that people who speak this liberated dialect are highly unlikely to be among those people sympathetic to the anti-sexist movements. (p. 4)

The second derivation of the general argument under discussion focuses not on the need for (and lack of) a correlational relationship between sexist language and societal practices that are sexist, but rather on the need for and lack of a correlation between other forms of oppression and language practices. Tavard (1977) presents this argument as follows:

> Not only women have been dominated in society, so have slaves, minority groups, minority races, underdeveloped tribes, the proletariat, "natives" in colonial countries, the under-educated everywhere. The thesis about sexist language is

> acceptable, from a linguistic point of view, only if one accepts the broader thesis that there is a necessary correlation between the structures of society and those of language. (p. 128)

Interestingly, the specific example of the replacement of Negro by black has been cited both in support of and in opposition to the changes proposed in sexist language. The proponents of change present it as an illustration of language change interacting with social change (e.g., Association for Women in Psychology Ad Hoc Committee on Sexist Language, 1975) while the opponents of change present it as a "lone example" (Kanfer, 1972, p. 72).

(2) The foregoing arguments do not deny the existence of sexism in language nor do they deny the undesirability of sexist practices in society, but instead imply that the (other) sexist practices are, or at least should be, of more concern than the language. The next argument to be presented simply makes this assumption explicit. One version of this argument is that efforts to change sexist practices will be hampered by efforts to change sexist language since individuals who might otherwise be convinced to support nonsexist practices will view all forms of sexism as trivial if sexist language is included as a concern. This argument is expressed in the two following quotations:

> I have read with increasing pain the letters in the Newsletter concerned with "sexist vocabulary." The pain comes from the recognition that the letters are expressing covertly the view that the feminist movement is silly and can be reduced to absurdity just as "feminist vocabulary" can be. (Gorenstein, 1972, p. 18)

> While the lunatic fringe of women's liberation strain at such semantic gnats as neuter pronouns, it swallows the whole male chauvinist camel of real injustice to women. The prejudiced, unenlightened and unjust are enabled to treat real injustice as if it were as trivial and silly as the fuss about chairpersons. (Howard, quoted in Friendly, 1978)

A second version of the argument is that efforts to change sexist language by feminists would divert time and energy that could be better applied to other feminist concerns.

(3) In contrast to all of the previously discussed arguments against change, the next argument to be presented completely bypasses the questions of the validity and importance of the proposals for change, and focuses instead on the issue of implementation of change. The following quote from Friendly (1978) exemplifies the claim that change is being coerced:

> [It] seems that a multitude of terrorized individuals and institutions (including state legislatures) have set about mangling perfectly neuter and valid words like <u>foreman</u> and <u>motorman</u>....[T]he creation of new words, monsters all, to replace perfectly good existing words of whose meaning the counterfeiters are ignorant. The principal counterfeiters--let us be frank about it at the outset--are the less sensible activists of the women's rights movement; the users are those who are cravenly intimidated by them.

Similarly, Kingston and Lovelace (1977) argue that

> [T]he term guidelines may be an euphemism...the term <u>regulations and standards</u> might be more appropriate, since articles

> not conforming to these "guidelines" are returned to authors for revision. (pp. 150-151)

The proponents of this argument have no need to argue the merits of the proposals for change as it is the issue of the enforcement of these proposals that concerns them.

(4) The most straightforward argument against sexist language is that sexist language does not exist. The reasons given for the alleged false belief in the existence of sexist language are the lunacy of the proponents of change (variously identified as "the lunatic fringe of the women's liberation movement," "the less sensible activists of the women's rights movement," "ladies who like Ms. in front of their names" and "really dyed in the wool feminists") or an alleged misunderstanding of the etymology of the words in question. At the same time, the intentions of the users of sexist language are presented as devoid of sexism. The following three quotations focus on various aspects of this argument:

> I suspect that much denunciation of sexist language in others reveals the bias of the hearer rather than that of the speaker. (Tavard, 1977, p. 136)

> There are those, however, who insist along with novelist Anthony Burgess that purity of intention is enough to guarantee both clarity and equity. Burgess is among those who maintain that their usage of the generic masculine is neutral; that "women force chauvinistic sex onto the word." (Martyna, in press)

> The use of <u>man</u> and <u>mankind</u> to refer to the human species as a whole is by no means "sexist" in origin. (Herman, 1972, p. 14)

The version of the argument that focuses on the etymology of words is closely related to an "appeal to authority" argument as evident in the following quotation:

> "Man" is the unmarked form in English. Since nobody ever listens to me, here goes again: "Man" is the unmarked form in English, that is, not distinguished as to sex....Even the Oxford English Dictionary agrees with me, giving as its first entry: "...a human being (irrespective of age or sex)." (McCurley, 1977, p. 5)

Stanley (1975b) also appeals to the Oxford English Dictionary as the authority on the subject, but comes to a very different conclusion concerning the meaning of man:

> [T]he arguments that favor man and mankind as generics are not substantive, but political. The Oxford English Dictionary states clearly in its definition of man that generic usage of the noun is "obsolete," and..."man as thus used primarily denotes the male sex"... (Stanley, 1975b)

A more general form of the "appeal to authority" argument is exemplified by Lakoff, a linguist:

> I think in any case that linguists should be consulted before any more fanciful plans are made public for reforming the inequities of English. (Lakoff, 1975, p. 45)

(5) An argument that focuses on the difficulty of change is often presented by individuals who recognize the sexist properties of language, but are prepared to view them as necessary evils for various reasons. To some

extent, this argument is similar to the one that recognizes sexism in language but considers it less important than other forms of sexism. While the general form of the argument is that changing one's idiolect is too difficult, a more frequently presented version is that only certain aspects of language are too difficult to change, notably the pronoun system. For example, Lakoff contends:

> I think one should force oneself to be realistic: certain aspects of language are available to the native speakers' conscious analysis, and others are too common, too thoroughly mixed throughout the language, for the speaker to be aware each time he [sic] uses them.... My feeling is that this area of pronominal neutralization is...less open to change than many of the other disparities... (Lakoff, 1975, p. 45)

Others report overcoming the difficulty, e.g., "I thought it would be hard at first to write she instead of he...but I didn't find it all that difficult" (a student, quoted in Adamsky, 1976, p. 6).

Closely related to the contention that change is difficult is the contention that nonsexist language is variously confusing, inconvenient, or impractical. Examples of this version of the argument are:

> To avoid confusion and repetition, men and women who practice the art will be referred to as Kung Fu men. (Minick, 1975)

> In some cases, for the convenience of the reader, we have allowed the ubiquitous <u>he</u> its traditional priority... (Belkin & Gray, 1977, p. xv)

> Nor do I think it is practical to have to list "the people who deliver the milk, the laundry and the newspaper, the person who opens the door, and the person who cleans the halls." (Post, 1978, pp. 70, 72)

(6) The final argument against change towards nonsexist language is the contention that such change would involve the rewriting of literary works, the idioms of the language, and even historical documents. Kingston and Lovelace (1977) warn against eliminating sexist writing as "[i]n literature, the 'ideal' often makes for saccharine reading" (p. 134). Brown (1976) in the following quotation, focuses on the issue of historical authenticity:

> Even while we berate the writers of the Old Testament for not being Twentieth-century womenslibbers, we hypocritically demand perversions of their language to pretend that they really were (p. 4).

Kanfer (1972), as part of his argument against change, compiled a lengthy list of changed idioms and phrases from literary works such as the following: "put up his duchesses," "his gander was cooked," and "Four Horsepersons of the Apocalypse."

Summary. All of the foregoing arguments have been repetitively offered by newspaper columnists and academicians alike as their response to the changes towards nonsexist language that they disapprove of. As evident in many of the examples that I have used to illustrate the arguments, the opponents of change are rarely content to present their arguments without ridiculing both the proposed changes and the proponents of change. Additionally, all of the arguments involve misunderstandings of the proposals

for change and/or have been extensively refuted. Nevertheless, the same arguments are being put forth in 1978 as were in 1972.

Misapplications of the Proposals for Nonsexist Language

Both in the writings of the opponents of change and in the English language community as a whole, a number of misapplications of the proposals for changing sexist language have occurred, either as tools for ridicule and thus as yet another argument against change, or simply as misunderstandings of the intent of the suggestions for change. Briefly, the misapplications that I will discuss include (1) overextensions of the proposed changes such that the morpheme structure of words is violated, (2) violations of parallelism in reference to the sexes, (3) partial changes that retain sex-stereotyping, and (4) the coining of words to ridicule other coinages.

(1) Overextensions. Overextensions of word meaning have been widely documented in the early stages of child language acquisition (Clark, 1973; Barrett, 1978) and overextensions of morphological productivity have been reported in older children (Chmura-Klekotowa, 1972; Peterson, 1974). A related phenomenon, the overextension of some of the proposed changes towards nonsexist language, has been reported in other overviews of sexist language.

> Very common and very salient are the overextensions of some of the suggestions for change. Perhaps this could be taken as indicative of ongoing language change or the learning of new rules, since overextensions commonly occur in first and second language acquisition as new rules are acquired... [M]ost of the overextensions have been made with the goal of being able to

> ridicule the overextensions, and thereby discredit the original proposals. (Blaubergs, 1974)
>
> [This] form of rebuttal appeals to writers who like to fool around with words the way first-graders do. The genre would be less tedious if only, once started, its devotees knew how to stop; but like six-year-olds, they tend to reach dizzying heights of self-titillation, driving themselves on to one more and yet one more bit of nonsense. (Miller & Swift, 1976, p. 88)
>
> [T]he use of humor or ridicule is common in the overextensions put forward by many columnists in recent years (e.g., "Never before in the herstory of personkind have such serious assaults been mounted on the Queen's English.") (Kramer, Thorne, & Henley, 1978, p. 648)

The overextensions of change towards nonsexist language may be classified as follows: from alleged masculine reference to alleged feminine reference, e.g., from hysterectomy to herterectomy, from hemorrhoids to shemorrhoids; from alleged feminine reference to alleged masculine reference, e.g., from hurricanes to himicanes, from hernia to hisnia; from a feminine term to a neutral term, e.g., from Girl Friday to One Friday, from midwives to midspouses; from alleged masculine reference to neutral terms, e.g., from ottoman to otto-it, from nymen to hything; and, double overextensions from masculine to neutral, e.g., from chairman via chairperson to chairperoffspring, and from human via huperson to huperone. Sources for these and other examples include Baker (1973), Bate (1976), Brown (1973), Kanfer (1972), Lakoff (1973, 1975), Messing (1972), Russo & Stier (1975), Scileppi, in Do It Now (1976), Silveira (1978), and Stillman (1974).

Typically, in the overextensions, morpheme structure is violated (e.g., "her" is not a morphological unit in hernia), word meaning is violated, and the word segment replaced has no sex referent. Other forms of overextensions involve proper names, e.g., Personhetten for Manhatten, Rockefolk for Rockefeller, or terms associated with the women's liberation movement, e.g., Ms. in Msapprehension, Msanthropic and Msguided (Kanfer, 1972).

Although I have presented a long list of variations on the theme of overextension, by far the most common is the overextension of "person" as a replacement for "man" wherever those three letters occur. The classic example is woperson for woman. This overextension appears almost as a code word in the titles of some of the efforts to ridicule language change, e.g., "The English Language versus Woperson's Lib" (Brown, 1973), and "Language and the Wopersons' Movement" (Friendly, 1978). The overextensions of "person" have been so frequent that Graham prepared an etymological analysis of the inappropriateness of the various overextensions. It reads, in part:

> [T]he man in manager, management, manuscript, manners, manipulate, manufacture, and manifest comes from the Latin manus, "hand." The man in mandate is from the Latin mandare, "to command"... (Miller & Swift, 1976, pp. 88-89)

A few overextensions, indistinguishable in some ways from those aimed at ridiculing legitimate language change, are in use by feminists. A classic example is herstory, the use of which has been defended as a consciousness-raising tool by the Association for Women in Psychology Ad Hoc Committee on Sexist Language (1975), Blaubergs (1974, 1978) and Miller and Swift (1976, p. 135). Concerning herstory, I previously wrote that:

> Lakoff (1973) criticizes it too harshly; indeed, history was not derived from his story, but historical accounts have largely left out the contributions of women and herstory usually appears in accounts that attempt to remediate such omission (Blaubergs, 1974).

There are other coinages in use by feminists that may be violating morphological structure: ovinal to replace seminal, and fem to replace female (Silveira, 1978). Also, some feminists have changed their own names to eliminate male-referent morphemes, notably Cooperperson who uses that name, but was denied a legal name change in court (Do It Now, 1976).

(2) Violations of Parallelism. Violations of parallel reference to the sexes are a phenomenon of changing usage patterns.

The form Ms. was introduced as a parallel to Mr. to be used in reference to adult females, married or unmarried. In actual usage, two variations that violate the parallel structure occur: one is the use of Ms. as a contrast to Mrs. and thus a replacement for Miss; the other is the use of Ms. as a third alternative form of address for women along with Mrs. and Miss. Bate (1976) in a survey of the acceptability of new and traditional usage among female and male university faculty members found that of her sample of 20, 16 found Ms. acceptable, but an equal number found Mrs. acceptable. On the other hand, five were uncomfortable with the use of Miss. These data do not clearly differentiate between the two variations in the use of Ms., but do suggest that Ms. is not viewed as a strict parallel to Mr. To document the existing usage of Ms., I examined the July or August 1978 issues of the following magazines: Cosmopolitan, McCalls, Modern Recording, Mother Jones, Ms., Organic Gardening, Redbook and Sphere. I tabulated the requests for names that appeared in coupons and postcards

to be sent to advertisers. Of 224 such requests, 192 (85.7%) did not specify titles; they were usually captioned "Name." Of those that specified titles, 22 included Ms. as an option, while 10 did not. The following combinations of titles included Ms.: Mr., Ms. (9); Miss, Mr., Mrs., Ms. (6); Mr., Mrs., Ms. (3); Mr., Mr. & Mrs., Mrs., Ms. (1); and Miss, Mrs., Ms. (3). The order of titles within each set varied to some extent. Clearly, Ms. is viewed as often as not as an alternative to other forms of address for women, and sometimes as the replacement for Miss.

The violation of parallel structure in word order, i.e., an invariant male first order, is typically presented by even many of the proponents of change as quite acceptable. For example, the Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA Journals (1977) suggest the replacement of his by his or her and note that "her or his may also be used, but it sounds awkward" (p. 490). Miller and Swift (1976) also consider the female first order as one for occasional use only:

> In pairs like male and female, men and women, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, boys and girls, Adam and Eve, males need not always come first. Occasionally reversing the order has two advantages... (p. 162)

An example of actual usage comes from a recent report by Women on Words and Images, Inc. (1977), "Sex Fairness in Education Division Communications, Products, and Dissemination Strategies," prepared for the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs. The report gave detailed attention to sex bias in language: five of the guidelines for sex fair communications involve language. The guideline labelled "'Man' First" presents as biased the use of the terms, he and she, men and women, boys and girls (p. 29). The authors recommend the use of she and he, women and men,

girls and boys, in alternation with the expressions in which the male referent is primary. However, in reading their report as a whole, my intuition suggested that the authors themselves had not followed this guideline. I tabulated the instances of the above-listed terms and other related examples both in the statements made directly by the authors and in the examples that they presented as sex-fair language. The instances of male first usage totalled 24 while female first usage occurred only 13 times. For pronouns, the ratio was even greater, 10 to 4 in favor of male first.

The final violation of parallelism to be discussed is the application of sex-neutral terms only to females. I have previously discussed this phenomenon with reference to the usage patterns for chairperson:

> One unfortunate tendency has been to accept the change, e.g., chairperson, but then use it inappropriately. It has often been used only in reference to women as though chairwoman were the problem word. Thus, chairman and chairperson become nonoverlapping terms, and the erroneous impression is given that feminists in their desire to be treated as persons, wish not to be called women. (Blaubergs, 1974)

(3) Sex-Stereotyped Partial Changes. The most appalling example, in my opinion, of sex-stereotyping in changes towards nonsexist language comes from a current textbook on child development. The author, Travers (1977), footnotes his first usage of he and also his subsequent first usage of she as follows: "Whenever he or she is used, I always mean he or she." His first instance of the use of he occurred in the following context:

> Otherwise we would not understand why a child often reacts unpredictably to tasks that he* must master at critical times in his life. (p. 5)

The first, and to my knowledge, only instance of generic she occurred in the following context:

> If a child suffers from malnutrition, her physical growth suffers, and she* may be smaller and weaker than her age-mates. Her brain may not develop all its potentialities and thus neither will the intellect. (p. 9)

(4) Words Coined to Ridicule. Two forms of overextension of changes proposed towards nonsexist language do not violate morphological structure but instead involve the coining of words to ridicule Ms. and the pronouns coined to replace he. In an effort to ridicule Ms., opponents of change have suggested the differentiation of the categories of married and unmarried men. Baker (1971) proposed Murm and Smur as titles for married and unmarried men respectively. Leeds (1972) suggested the revival of Bierce's Mush (Mn.) in reference to unmarried men, and Bernstein (cited in Miller & Swift, 1976, p. 102) suggested a further differentiation: Bar for bachelors and Wow for widowers.

As for pronouns, a rich variety of new coinages has been proposed in order to ridicule more serious efforts such as those of Archer (cited in Bezis, 1974), Densmore (1970), MacKay (cited in Martyna, 1976), MacLeod and Silverman (1973), Miller and Swift (1972), One (1971) and Orovan (cited in Miller & Swift, 1976). The efforts to ridicule coined pronouns are exemplified by Brown (1973):

> ...they sound too appropriately like "teehee." But there is a perfect word which meets all the requirements and is not really needed for anything else: "Sheesh."

Other ridiculing suggestions include the following coinages: per (Clark, 1972); shis, shim(s), shim, shimself (Kaplan, 1972); mf or fm (Kay, 1972); and ze, zees, zim, zeeself (Polgar, 1972).

Conclusion

The responses to language change towards nonsexist usage, whether they are theoretical arguments against such change that have appeared in newspapers, magazines, and scholarly newsletters, or misapplications in actual usage, or ridicule, all indicate that the awareness of change in sexist aspects of English is in evidence in American society.

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